# Israel hampering polio vaccine drive as daily bombardment of Gaza continues

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The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations began the second stage of a polio vaccine campaign in southern Gaza Thursday, as the far-right Israeli regime continued with its genocidal onslaught against the Palestinians.

Having decimated Gaza's health care system and destroyed virtually all water treatment and sewage processing facilities during 11 months of continuous bombardment with US-supplied weapons, Israel has created the conditions in which the potentially deadly polio virus, which can cause paralysis in the limbs, could surge across Gaza and beyond.

The Palestinian Health Ministry reported Thursday that Israel is refusing to coordinate access for the teams of healthcare workers, numbering some 2,700, involved in the vaccine drive. "We appeal to all concerned institutions and authorities to intervene urgently to ensure the success of the vaccination campaign by reaching all children wherever they are," the ministry said in a statement.

The WHO announced the successful conclusion of the vaccination campaign in central Gaza, where its coverage target was surpassed between 1 and 4 September, which may be in part due to the rapid shifts of displaced people to the area. The ongoing phase in the south, which runs until Sunday, aims to reach 340,000 children, while a phase in the north will begin Monday and conclude Wednesday for some 150,000 children.

Although reports claim Israel has agreed to ceasefires in local areas for a few hours each day to facilitate the vaccination campaign, the reality is that attacks on Gaza's few remaining healthcare facilities are continuing. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) struck al-Aqsa hospital in Deir el-Balah in central Gaza just hours after its three vaccination points closed at the completion of the vaccine drive in the enclave's central region. Al Jazeera reporter Hani Mahmoud noted that the roads to most vaccination points have been destroyed, making it difficult if not impossible for many Palestinians to reach them.

According to the WHO, 90 percent coverage is required among children aged between one day and 10 years in order to prevent the spread of polio throughout the region. The virus was first detected last month in a 10-month-old baby 25 years after the virus was officially eliminated from Gaza.

The return of polio to Gaza underscores the barbarism of Israel's genocide of the Palestinians. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's fascist government set out to destroy any basis for modern life in Gaza. The systematic obliteration of hospitals, schools and other critical infrastructure, the use of humanitarian aid as a weapon of war, and the indiscriminate massacring of men, women and children have turned Gaza into a massive graveyard. Even if the polio vaccination campaign succeeds in suppressing the resurgence of the deadly disease, which appears highly questionable given the horrendous conditions on the ground, other diseases and starvation will continue to flourish and claim thousands of lives.

BBC Arabic noted late last month that the water off Gaza's Mediterranean coast is turning brown due to the direct discharge of raw sewage into the sea in the absence of treatment facilities. Israel has destroyed all of Gaza's water treatment plants and sewage management systems. Contact with infected feces is the principal means by which polio is transmitted.

Oxfam has reported that already one-quarter of Gaza's more than 2 million residents have been sickened by waterborne diseases. "Polio is a waterborne disease and it is directly linked to the

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sanitation situation," commented Lama Abdul Samad, a water and sanitation expert at Oxfam. "The sanitation infrastructure has been damaged severely to the point that it is flooding the streets and the neighbourhoods, and people are basically living adjacent to puddles of sewage."

Earlier in August, the United Nations Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) reported 40,000 cases of hepatitis A, another disease transmitted through contaminated water, since the beginning of Israel's genocide, compared to just 85 for the same period prior to October 7. Rampant skin diseases, especially among children, and the threat of a cholera outbreak are also ringing alarm bells among medical professionals.

"The waste management system in Gaza has collapsed. Piles of trash are accumulating in the scorching summer heat. Sewage discharges on the streets while people queue for hours just to go to the toilets," commented UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini. This is "a dangerous recipe for diseases to spread."

This is the desired outcome for the Israeli regime, whose leading representatives have described the Palestinians as "human animals" and openly discussed the use of disease to exterminate Gaza's population. As Giora Eiland, the former head of Israel's National Security Council, infamously wrote in an article last November:

> The international community warns us of a humanitarian disaster in Gaza and of severe epidemics. We must not shy away from this, as difficult as that may be. After all, severe epidemics in the south of the Gaza Strip will bring victory closer and reduce casualties among IDF soldiers.

With the official death toll fast approaching 41,000 Palestinians and the real number of fatalities over 186,000 according to an estimate published in *The Lancet*, Israel has carried out, with the backing of the imperialist powers, war crimes comparable with those perpetrated by the Nazi regime.

As it continues daily bombardments across Gaza, including a strike Thursday in the north near the Kamal Adwan hospital that killed three, Israel has over recent days intensified its violent assault on Palestinians in the West Bank.

The UN's latest update on the humanitarian situation in Gaza paints a terrible picture. Speaking at a press conference Thursday, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric described conditions as "beyond catastrophic." More than 1 million Palestinians received no food parcels in August, due to a combination of declining food supplies and the inability of aid organisations to access the enclave. The number of Palestinians obtaining daily cooked meals fell by 35 percent, with Dujarric explaining that the reduction was mainly due to the forcible closure or relocation of 70 out of 130 kitchens following Israeli evacuation orders.

Israel could not have killed hundreds of thousands and laid waste to Gaza's infrastructure, creating the perfect conditions for thousands more deaths from disease, without the unstinting support of the imperialist powers. The Biden administration's supplying of at least 14,000 2,000-pound bombs equipped the IDF with the necessary firepower to turn the enclave into a wasteland.

US imperialism and its European allies back this act of barbarism to the hilt because they view it as a necessary component of advanced plans for a region-wide war aimed at Iran. The only social force capable of putting an end to the Gaza genocide and all of its horrific consequences is the international working class, fighting on the basis of a socialist and internationalist programme.

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